

CHAPTER SIX

THE NEWLYWEDS LIVE AT THE GATES HOUSE

- * The Newlyweds Live At the Gates House
- * Truman the Politician
- * Birth of a Daughter

The Newlyweds Live at the Gates House

A year and one day following the funeral of George P. Gates, the wedding of Captain Harry S Truman and Elizabeth Virginia Wallace took place at 4 p.m., June 28, 1919, at Trinity Episcopal Church in Independence. The bride was given away in marriage by her brother, Frank Gates Wallace. A reception was held at the Gates house.¹

Harry and Bess Truman returned to 219 North Delaware after their Michigan honeymoon to begin married life in 1919. It proved to be their lifelong home together. The principal reason the couple did not establish their own household was due to the chronic frail health of Madge Wallace who suffered from sciatica, a neuritis of the hip area. The painful affliction severely restricted the daily activity of Madge Wallace. With the responsibility of caring for her mother and grandmother, Bess Truman decided to remain at her family home.² One relative recalled:

Bess thought they should stay until her mother got used to the idea. Bess was very devoted to her mother. Oh, very! And, of course, Mrs. Wallace was a very wonderful mother, a very devoted mother. So, mother never got quite settled enough for Bess to leave. And they liked it that way, and Harry liked it that way. He was devoted to Mrs. Wallace, too, and she to him....³

Another stated:

After they were married, they thought they were going to live out in Grandview, but that summer, Mother Wallace became very ill. Bess came home; it was soon after they were married. She came home to take care of her mother, and they never did establish any other residence.⁴

Truman turned from farming to merchandising to support his new wife. He and war buddy Eddie Jacobson had operated a canteen together at an army training camp in Oklahoma before being shipped to Europe. Both decided to operate a similar business in peacetime. Preparations for opening the store took nearly five months, but "Truman & Jacobson" opened in November 1919 opposite Kansas City's prestigious Muehlebach Hotel. It was a men's furnishings establishment featuring items tailored for the well-to-do. Truman & Jacobson was open six days a week and more than 12 hours a day. Both partners worked long hours and usually did not go home until late at night. Truman was in charge of the bookkeeping and he often took the work home where Bess would help him.⁵ Of this time period, a journalist wrote:

No matter what his job was, Harry Truman always took home a briefcase full of work, but the house on North Delaware never seemed to be quiet. Floors were forever being waxed, curtains hung, ceilings painted, and walls papered, particularly it seemed in exactly the places where Harry Truman was trying to concentrate.⁶

It was not from lack of hard work that the business failed, but the postwar price deflation which forced Truman &

Jacobson to close in early 1922. Truman refused to declare bankruptcy, and would work to repay his debt. His tight financial bind made living at 219 North Delaware a necessity.

Truman the Politician

Just as rapidly as the haberdashery failed, Harry Truman launched himself into politics with the help of a friend and former Army officer, Lieutenant Jim Pendergast. Pendergast was the son of Mike Pendergast, political boss of eastern Jackson County, who, in turn, was the brother of Tom Pendergast, boss of the entire county. Truman was encouraged to run as a candidate for Eastern Judge of Jackson County. Truman won the Democratic primary in August and the general election in November. He took office in January 1923. As a member of the Pendergast political machine which operated from Kansas City in western Jackson County, Truman stayed apart from its machinations, preferring to manage the affairs of the eastern section from Independence.⁷

Although the practice was frowned on by the female residents, Judge Truman could not turn away those who came to 219 North Delaware looking for a county job. They were usually received in the first floor study.⁸

Birth of a Daughter

Next to his marriage, the second most important event in the life of Harry S Truman was the birth of his daughter, Mary Margaret. Bess Truman, 39, refused to go to a hospital, preferring instead to deliver her baby in the comfort and privacy of her family home. In the four years of her marriage, Bess Truman had miscarried twice.⁹ During a bitter snowstorm on February 17, 1924, a daughter was born to Harry and Bess Truman in their second floor, east bedroom. Born earlier than expected, no furnishings had been purchased for the baby. Little Margaret Truman spent the first days of her life sleeping on two pillows in the opened drawer of a bureau in the Trumans' bedroom.

For the first two years of her life, Margaret slept in the same room with her parents. In 1926, when it was decided that she was old enough to be given her own bedroom, Margaret was moved to the small second floor bedroom in the rear (east). To facilitate access to her bedroom, especially in the darkness of the night, a passageway was built connecting the Trumans' bedroom with that of their small daughter. A portion of the second floor sleeping porch was taken for the passageway. Access to the porch had always been through an open window, and no door or window was claimed to build the passageway.¹⁰

The Newlyweds Live at the Gates House

¹"Wallace-Truman," Examiner (June 28, 1919), p. 1, folder-Truman, Harry S 1919, Research Room Vertical File, HSTL. The article reported that the couple "left immediately after the ceremony for an extended trip north," but Miss Ethel Noland recalls having been at the wedding reception at 219 North Delaware. See, "Trumans to Observe 50th Quietly," Kansas City Times (June 28, 1969), p. 2A, folder-Truman, Harry S 1969, Research Room Vertical File, HSTL.

²Mrs. George P. (May) Wallace, Interview, Independence, Mo., June 14, 1983. Sciatica is a neuritis or simple neuralgia of the sciatic nerve, an affection characterized by paroxysmal attacks of pain along the course of the branches of the sciatic nerve. Popularly, it is known as any of various painful affections of the hip and adjoining parts.

³Mary Ethel Noland, Oral History Interview, Independence, Mo., August 13, September 9 and 16, 1965, by J. R. Fuchs, HSTL, pp. 118-19.

⁴Mrs. George P. (May) Wallace, Interview, Independence, Mo., June 14, 1983.

⁵Merle Miller, Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman (New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1973), p. 109. Another author stated that Truman seldom got "back to the Gates house before midnight" and that "home life was meager during this hectic period." See Alfred Steinberg, The Man From Missouri: The Life and Times of Harry S. Truman (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1962), p. 55.

⁶Miller, Plain Speaking, p. 106.

Truman the Politician

⁷Robert Ferrell, Dear Bess (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1983), pp. 301-04.

⁸Sue Gentry, Interview, Independence, Mo., June 22, 1983. Gentry's own brother was among those who went to the house seeking political favors or advice.

Birth of a Daughter

⁹Cockrell, "Oral History Interview with Margaret

Truman," p. 1.

¹⁰Mrs. George P. (May) Wallace, Interviews,
Independence, Mo., June 14 and July 20, 1983.